

Opinion – Khalistan's Impact on India-Canada Relations

Written by Anjali Singh

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ANJALI SINGH, OCT 15 2023

Canada-India tensions escalated on 19 September 2023 after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused “agents of the Indian government” of killing Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023. The claims were denounced as “absurd and motivated” by India and strained bilateral relations between these two countries, which were already at an all-time low. Following this, India asked its residents in Canada to take extreme caution in light of rising anti-Indian sentiment and act of hatred.

Prior to this, India and Canada have traditionally maintained bilateral relations based on common goals including democracy, pluralism, and strong interpersonal ties. With around 4% of Canadians of Indian ethnicity (1.3 million individuals), and 100,000 Indian students, Canada has one of the largest overseas Indian communities. Both countries have worked to strengthen bilateral collaboration in a number of mutually advantageous areas. Several agreements have been signed between India and Canada, including the Air Services Agreement, Extradition Treaty, Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, Patent Agreement, MoU between the Ministry of Railways and the Department of Transport of Canada on Technical Cooperation in Rail Transportation. India was Canada’s tenth-largest trading partner in 2022 and India forms a significant partner for Canada’s developed economic ties to the Indo-Pacific as part of a new, comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy.

The genesis of Khalistan can potentially be traceable to the British colonial policies in the late 1800s and early 1900s that tried to split Sikhs and Hindus. Sikhs were recruited in great numbers into the British army to deploy against Hindu monarchs who rebelled against the British Raj. After Indian independence in 1947, disputes between the state of Punjab and the central Indian government emerged, resulting in grievances against the Indian government among many Sikhs. A demand for Khalistan, or a separate and independent country for Sikhs, arose when the British partitioned India and established Pakistan. The movement emphasised on Punjab, where Sikhs represent the majority. However, Punjab was engaged in a violent political mass movement during the 1970s and 1980s and some leaders asserted that Sikh interests would be safe only in an independent Sikh country like Khalistan.

The violent confrontations in April 1978 between radicalised Sikh sections led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the Nirankari sect are seen as the commencement of the Khalistan movement. In 1980, Bhindranwale and his allies began targeting Hindus and assassinated Lala Jagat Narain, the publisher of Punjab Kesr – a local daily and a prominent critic of Bhindranwale. This was followed by widespread violence against residents across the state. The movement reached its apex in the 1980s and 1990s, with a campaign that included bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and killing of civilians. In June 1984, the violence reached a climax when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi directed the army to take control of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where Khalistan leaders were seeking shelter.

Operation Bluestar, that took place between June 1–8 1984, had the objective of neutralising Bhindranwale and his armed supporters. The Sikh community expressed disgust at what it considered to be destruction of the holy shrine, and later that year, India’s then-prime minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards. This exacerbated anti-Sikh beliefs, resulting in widespread violence and India experienced violent religious unrest. In 1985, the violence took on an international dimension when Sikh extremists situated in Canada were responsible for the bombing of Air India Flight 182 off the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 passengers and crew, including 268 Canadians.

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Prior to the most recent incident, the Indian government has consistently expressed worry about Pro-Khalistan separatists in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Khalistan supporters in the West have actively lobbied against India, where the Sikh population plays a major role in politics, while soliciting finances for Khalistan terror groups, typically through informal hawala networks. Canada has seen an upsurge of Khalistan-related activities in 2023. Anonymous insurgents vandalised a Ram temple in Mississauga with anti-India graffiti on February 17. Khalistani extremists defiled the Gauri Shankar Mandir in Brampton, Ontario, on January 31 with phrases such as 'Khalistan Zindabad, Hindustan Murdabad' were spray-painted on the walls. Previously, in September 2022, a similar incident occurred at a Toronto temple, with footage spreading on social media displaying the identical sentiments – 'Khalistan Zindabad, Hindustan Murdabad' – written on the temple's walls. Back in February 2022, six Hindu temples in Toronto were allegedly attacked by extremists.

In response to Hardeep Singh Nijjar's killing, the Indian government responded aggressively. MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi stated that Canada provides shelter to terrorists and that India has named at least 20–25 persons over the years, but no action has been taken. MEA further released an advisory by rejecting Canada's allegation and urged the Canadian Government to take immediate and potent legal action against all anti-India groups operating in Canada:

We have seen and reject the statement of the Canadian Prime Minister in their Parliament, as also the statement by their Foreign Minister. Allegations of Government of India's involvement in any act of violence in Canada are absurd and motivated. Similar allegations were made by the Canadian Prime Minister to our Prime Minister, and were completely rejected. We are a democratic polity with a strong commitment to rule of law.

Observing India's assertiveness, US Ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, verified that there was "shared intelligence among Five Eyes partners" that notified Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the Indian government's suspected involvement in the killing. After this Trudeau had been caught off guard and urged India to "shed full transparency, ensure accountability and justice in this manner." He also emphasised that Canada is not aiming to instigate or create obstacles, but that it's judicial system, "and robust processes will follow its course," in investigating the allegation. India, on the other hand, has strongly rejected the accusations, calling them "absurd and motivated." According to Arindam Bagchi, a spokesperson for India's foreign ministry, Canada has supplied "no specific information" to back up the allegations against it.

The Khalistan issue exhibits the multifaceted nature and sensitivity of this situation. India is particularly concerned about Canadian backing for the Khalistan movement, which it sees as a threat to its sovereignty and national security. However, it is critical for both India and Canada to resolve these issues through diplomatic means and productive dialogue.

About the author:

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